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ABSTRACT

Data analyses from 14 case studies of American rural communities reveal specific diversities and differences from typical urban areas, and suggest that rural schools and rural areas are one integrated social structure, which implies that one cannot intervene in one without impacting on the other. Implications from this hypothesis indicate that public policy must take a holistic view of rural schools and rural communities as one unitary social system, and form the basis for a recommended agenda for rural school improvement in three categories: (1) broadening the data base on rural America/rural schools; (2) examining the forces intervening on rural communities/rural education which shape its present operation; and (3) creating a development capacity within rural education. Creating improved procedures for rural schooling, through redefinition of the needs, processes, and possibilities of quality education for rural students, necessitates the development of a more differentiated and flexible public policy, and places the responsibility for implementation of the new procedures on the combined efforts of those working in rural education and those who live in rural communities. (JCL)

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"IMPROVING EDUCATION IN RURAL AMERICA:
PAST EFFORTS, FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES"

ACCEPTING RURAL REALITY:
AN AGENDA FOR THE FUTURE IMPROVEMENT
OF RURAL EDUCATION

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ACCEPTING RURAL REALITY
AN AGENDA FOR THE FUTURE IMPROVEMENT
OF RURAL EDUCATION

Rural America as a unique segment of society, continues to exist in a rich variety of forms. The diversity which has frustrated policy makers in dealing with rural problems continues. Neither ignoring that segment of the population nor implementing uniform "urban" policies has made the problem less unique or less urgent.

The differences generally acknowledged in public policy are those that can be easily captured in statistical data, e.g., size, diversity, economic indicators---. And while important, the differences that make a difference are more qualitative than quantitative. If one constructs a continuum along the dimensions of size and density at some point "urban" becomes "rural". What is not evident from such a continuum is that in moving from urban to rural, the nature of the social structure changes.

Generally speaking, the layers of bureaucracy found in large urban/suburban communities, are lacking in small communities, communication can therefore be more direct, verbal transactions can be substituted for written communiques. The validity of information is likely to be based as much on who said it as on what's said. Social relationships are more personal and tightly knit, people are known as individuals, not just statistics. Small town rural society is generally more integrated with individuals performing multiple roles. Running the town's business is a part-time job; construction workers still have multiple skills; doctors, when available, are generalists, not specialists; businessmen tend to be entrepreneurs, not employees of a large retail chain. Values tend to be more traditional, with the

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family structure more intact, although this is changing in communities where immigration is taking place. Traditionally rural communities are more homogenous racially and socio economically. In rural areas a man's word is still likely to be a binding agreement; trust is not yet a thing of the past.

While rural communities exhibit fairly unique characteristics which set them apart from their urban counterparts, rural schools operate very much as mini "urban schools". Public policy which has encouraged consolidation and professionalization during the last 100 years has molded rural schools into the "one best system". Imposing the formal, specialized structure of an "urban" school system on a rural community would appear to be trying to fit a square peg into a round hole and it is with this school/community interface where both the problems and the key to productive rural school improvement lie. While the more impersonal, loosely-connected, specialized nature of urban society may allow intervention in the school separate from the community, in rural America schooling is the community's business. It is clear from this study that rural schools and rural communities are one integrated social structure, one cannot intervene in one without impacting on the other.

Accepting the above realities of rural America has important implications for public policy designed to improve rural education:

1. Public policy must take a more wholistic view of rural schools and rural communities dealing with the two together, as one unitary social system. Any significant improvement of education will depend upon implementing educational processes which are more consistent with and in harmony with the unique social structure of rural communities.

2. The process of problem definition must be moved back to the local community level. Rather than having problems defined by "urban" outsiders using criteria suited for larger schools, rural people must be involved in defining educational problems using local criteria to determine if a problem is a problem.

3. Public policy needs to be established in such a way that it can accommodate the wide diversity which exists among rural communities across America.

The following agenda for rural school improvement is based on these premises. The recommendations fall into three categories: (1) broadening the data base on rural America/rural schools; (2) an examination of the forces intervening on rural communities/ rural education which shape its present operation; (3) creating a development capacity within rural education.

Developing a Data Base: Four types of studies are needed to create a suitable data base for rural education improvement:

1. Taxonomy of rural communities - In reviewing the data from the 14 cases of this study, the communities tended to fall into three fairly distinct types, based on socio/economic, cultural, political factors (see Appendix A); (1) poor/minority, (2) traditional middle America, and (3) communities in transition. This primitive beginning of a taxonomy could be the basis of a more differentiated rural education policy. Needed, however, are a series of descriptive/ sociological studies to refine such a taxonomy. While some rural

community case studies exist which could contribute to the development of a taxonomy, e.g., those prepared in connection with the evaluation of the Rural Experimental Schools Program and Peshkin's Growing Up American, further studies will be needed to sample as much of the diversity of rural America as possible. Such studies should try to capture the operational dynamics of rural communities and should include in addition to the usual socio/economic information some insights into the political control issues; existence and role of minorities; population trends, if increasing, why and who are the immigrants; extent of rurality, e.g., size/density, existence of cultural and/or natural barriers; community value system.

2. Nature of Rural Schools - Descriptive information on rural schools is needed along the same community type breakdown as above, but with one additional cut. Since the problems of implementing a one-best-system increase as the size of school decreases, descriptive studies of the operation of rural schools should be undertaken on schools with fewer than 300 K-12, schools with enrollment of 300-to 999 and 1,000 to 2,500. In addition to the usual statistical data on finance, enrollment, curricular offerings, etc., information is needed on:

a. Leaderships- What kind does the superintendent provide, what is the tenure history, what role does the superintendent play in broader community settings;

b. The teachers:- who are they, where did they come from, where trained, how long do they stay, why do they leave;

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c. The school board - Who are they, how long do they serve, how are they tied into the political power structure;

d. Recent significant events of the life of the district - e.g., school consolidation, bond issues, passed or failed, school/community conflicts.

3. School/Community Interface - While it is clear that rural schools and rural communities exist as part of one tightly knit social structure, what is not known is just how the tight linkages operate. Our study suggests that attempts to establish formal school community councils have not been all that successful, council activity declines or stops all together once the funding or a specific crisis is over. Yet rural schools operate within constraints which if ignored are sure to precipitate community reaction. The linkages appear to be organic, informal but very tight. Understanding just how the linkages work, how the community expectations get expressed for schools and how one goes about influencing those expectations is important to rural school improvement.

4. Student follow up study - One of the general assumptions about rural schools is that they need to prepare students to live and work in urban areas. Is this true for all children of all rural community types? Are there some schools/communities where large percentages of students stay or move to other rural communities? If so, what kinds of education programs are needed that are different from the basic college prep curriculum which typifies the traditional small school program.

Analysis of Forces Which Shape Rural Education: Through the years efforts to improve education through the establishment of minimum standards for teacher preparation, curriculum, length of school term, and more recent legislation mandating programs for special populations, have molded rural schools into the "one best system". An examination of these forces is needed to determine if and how such policies prevent rural schools from operating in a mode consistent with rural communities, providing programs appropriate for rural children. Areas needing careful study are:

1. Public policy - A critical review is needed of the plethora of legal statutes, credentialing and accreditation procedures, school finance laws and the growing array of special mandated programs for minorities, handicapped, women, which contribute to the framework within which rural education must take place. Inherent in the homogenous, tight knit, personal social structure of rural communities may be conditions which call for a different interpretation and implementation of these policy mandates.

2. Personnel training - Teacher and administrative preparation programs like education generally have taken on more generic characteristics through the years. Few programs are tailored to train personnel for rural areas, and where they exist they speak more to coping with the deficiencies of rural schools than creating approaches uniquely designed for rural communities. Using the growing data base on rural community/rural school social structures, a review needs to be made of existing programs to determine how they can be modified for rural schools.

In addition to the substantive program changes, attitudes inherent in existing training programs which present teaching/

administering in small rural schools as a second rate option need to be addressed.

3. Service Delivery - Our study suggests that service delivery systems be they higher education, SEAs or regional service agencies, tend to respond to pressures coming down from the top rather than to the needs of clients at the local level. Further studies are needed to see to what extent this is true, and, if so, what mechanisms might be used to make service agencies more responsive to local schools and communities.

Creating a Development Capacity Within Rural Education: (While the above agenda items are concerned with improving our understanding about rural education, the following recommendations relate to an action agenda which should begin immediately as a parallel activity to the study efforts. Establishing and maintaining communications between the activities would move both agendas ahead.)

The capacity to develop suitable programs for rural education is virtually nonexistent. Not because the people are not there; creative people are found in small as well as large schools. Large schools, however, have a greater flexibility to free up these individuals to do developmental work and funding agencies are more inclined to fund the larger schools since processing a few larger grants is easier than administering a large number of small grants. Rural schools are therefore put into the position of being consumers of urban-developed programs.

Further, textbook companies and other curriculum development efforts have ignored the need of rural schools since (a) the numbers involved are compared to the urban market sufficiently small as to limit the profitability and (b) the widely accepted assumptions that education is a generic endeavor, that rural schools are just smaller versions of large schools and therefore the curriculum should be the same.

In calling for the creation of a rural development capability, we are not suggesting the creation of one, two or a half dozen rural education development centers. rather we are suggesting strategies which should be a part of any agency interested in improving rural education, be they SEAs, regional labs., intermediate service agencies or colleges and universities.

1. Central to any school improvement program is people development, creating within those involved the new perspectives, new skills and understandings which will allow a program to move forward. We have found experiential programs which have participants working on real problems, visiting and working along with others in similar situations, very effective in helping to facilitate the human resources needed to bring about educational change. Critical to such a strategy is a little money to buy the participants time to develop their capabilities and sensitive program leadership to help participants think about the problems they wish to address and point them in the direction of other individuals and programs that can be helpful.

2. Follow up support, both technical and psychological, is critical to any change effort. Support networks for individuals involved in rural school improvement are necessary to overcome the isolation experienced by school personnel who may be one of a kind in their community. The opportunity to share ideas and problems on a regular basis would contribute much to local capacity building.

3. A companion strategy to freeing people up from day to day routines is to bring new ideas and assistance to small rural schools on a regular basis. How these ideas/assistance are brought in is as important as the substance of the ideas and assistance. Timing is very important, help is needed when it's needed, not before or after. The establishment of a basic level of trust between those bringing the assistance and those receiving the assistance, is essential. Circuit riders are one way to bring in this assistance, providing sabbaticals for talented rural teachers to serve as traveling "advisors" working in classrooms alongside the regular teacher in trying out new educational processes is another.

Creating a capacity for rural education development will take time, a field that has been neglected for so long will not reemerge overnight.

An important part of creating a development capacity within rural education, is the creation of a new vision, a reconceptualization of what rural education could be. We are not suggesting going back to the one-room school, although as urban education problems seem more and more

insurmountable, it is tempting, as many recent journalists have done, to look to the remaining one-room schools and the memories held about this era to search for answers. What is needed is to evolve some new models, an "intermediate technology" of education which falls somewhere in between the country school of days past and the "urban" school which has taken its place. Just what such a school would look like and how it would operate in different types of rural communities is difficult to imagine. All of us, educators, parents, community people, have for so long seen schooling in only one way, that rethinking and developing alternatives for rural communities will be a long and arduous task.

The small scale of rural schools has the potential strength of:

- Smaller classes, more individualized instruction;
- Teachers knowing their students as individuals and the family background from which they come, thus insuring a better fit between instructional program and student. (This can also have a negative side if a child comes from a "bad family" he may not have a chance to succeed on his own merits.);
- Students not being redundant, each student serves an important function in the ongoing life of the school with a much greater chance for participating in all aspects of the educational program;
- Teachers still having a sense of control over what and how they teach;
- More flexibility, enabling the school to capitalize on the strengths of individual teachers;

- Administrators and teachers being on the 'same side' with conditions of employment still being a fairly minor concern in terms of total energy expended;

- School board members are known as individuals, providing the opportunity for broad participation in policy formulation;

- A minimum amount of bureaucratic structure which allows a higher percentage of the resources (financial and personal) being devoted to the instructional process and less to "systems maintenance". And since "time on task" is one of the major factors of effective teaching, small schools have the potential for being even more efficient than large schools.

If small schools were to use their flexibility and accessibility to the real world outside the classroom door, the learning tasks could be substantially more powerful than the currently used textbook replications. Studying history and learning to write by interviewing and capturing the information from the memories of senior citizens as exemplified in the Loblolly/Foxfire publications can make two traditionally dreary learning experiences come alive. Understanding the concepts of government by observing and participating in town meetings or sessions of the county commissioners can give real meaning to a civics course. Easily accessible to any rural school is a living laboratory for the study of biology and botany. Lumbering and mining activities provide the real live problems of balancing access to needed resources with preserving the ecology. Space adjacent to schools is almost always available for use in experimenting

with plants and animals. It is a strange perspective which we have adopted on learning when such reality is seen as "enrichment" rather than the real stuff of learning. Urban schools because of logistics and inaccessability of these resources, must simulate these learning experiences through textbooks and other learning aids. Such need not be the case in rural schools.

If freed from the constraints of our present organizational structure, specialists which small schools do not now have access to, could be hired jointly by a number of districts. Using a block schedule, i.e., teaching classes for 1/2 day for a quarter rather than the usual hour period for semester or year, teachers could rotate from one school to the next four times a year rather than daily, thus cutting down on time and money of excess travel.

Technology has long been heralded as holding promise for expanding and enriching the curriculum of small rural schools. Educational television, amplified telephone, computer-based instruction, all hold promise as a way to bring quality instruction to students, regardless of where they live, the big city or the small village. For various reasons, inadequate programming, insufficient teacher training, poor equipment, unwillingness of teachers to change behavior patterns, such promises have not yet been widely realized. Further study is needed to determine just why efforts to use technology have not met with greater success; it may be that the impersonal quality of technological instruction just does not quite fit what has traditionally been the human enterprise of rural schooling.

These are but a few of the possibilities for developing educational programs that are more suited for rural communities. By continuing to look at the inherent strengths of small rural communities rather than the deficiencies of schools in terms of an "urban" system other ideas are sure to emerge.

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Creating improved procedures for rural schooling, developing a more differentiated public policy which not only tolerates but supports these different approaches to schooling is a chicken and egg problem. Without some notion of what rural schooling could look like it is difficult to say what policy is needed. Without some flexibility of policy it is difficult to develop the new models. The above recommendations are intended to provide some starting points on both fronts.

The above recommendations put much of the responsibility for moving ahead on those working in rural education and those who live in rural communities. This is as it must be. A lesson that comes through exceedingly clear from this study is that planning done for rural people does not lead to successful implementation.

It denies them the will and capacity to undertake action on their own behalf, it is out of step with rural traditions. However, they cannot do it alone, local people, rural educators must be linked with knowledgeable professionals in relationships of mutual trust and commitment. This implies the involvement of professional experts with local people over the long term and at each step of the developmental process.

Accepting the reality of rural America opens a whole array of possibilities not previously available. It opens the possibility that rural education might just look and operate differently. It opens the possibility that inherent in size and sparsity are reasons for school finance formulas to provide more money for rural education. It opens the possibility for professionals to work in rural education at all levels, development, providing services as well as teaching and administration without having to move to the cities to "get-to-the-top" of the career ladder. It opens the possibility that rural children can receive a quality education program designed specifically for their needs rather than a second-rate program defined by "urban" standards.

APPENDIX A

TAXONOMY OF RURAL COMMUNITIES

	Values	Socio/ Economic Factors	Political Structure/Locus of Control
I. "People Left Behind"	Traditional/ Commonly Held	Fairly Homogenous Low Income	Tends to be closed, concentrated, often lies outside local community
II. "Traditional Middle America"	Traditional Commonly Held	Fairly Homogenous Middle Income	Tends to be more open/widely dispersed
III. "Communities in Transition"	Wide Range Represented	Wide Range- Low to High	Shifting from "old timers" to "newcomers"